Review of the book, *Prejudiced communication: A social psychological perspective*

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Janet Ruscher, PREJUDICED COMMUNICATION: A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE. New York: Guilford, 2001; pp. 236, $30.00 hardcover, ISBN: I572306386.

The race problem is solved. Racism is dead. Now we just have the backlash problem: too many groups pushing too hard for special rights and special status. These, at least, are the beliefs of the "modern racist," according to Janet Ruscher.

In her new book, *Prejudiced Communication: A Social Psychological Perspective*, Ruscher sets out to demonstrate just the opposite—that racism and, indeed, prejudice in general are alive and kicking. The vibrancy of prejudice is, according to Ruscher, apparent in various forms of everyday communicative action. She succeeds nicely in demonstrating that claim. Examining prejudiced communication via countless examples and drawing upon a wide body of emerging scholarship, she shows that prejudiced communication is, in fact, as pervasive as it ever was, albeit more subtle at times.

Ruscher approaches her task from the perspective of a traditional social psychologist, within a decidedly cognitive-functionalist frame. She proceeds by examining, through a functionalist lens, the communicative evidence for cognitive schemata group members, hold toward outsiders. "Prejudiced communication is pervasive because it serves a variety of functions" (p. 5), writes Ruscher. Thus, racial epithets, stereotypes, "talking down," nonverbal signals, media images, and other cultural forces are examined with a mind toward uncovering the functions they serve within the groups employing them.

As Ruscher quickly notes, one of the prominent functions of prejudiced communication is in how it serves the development and maintenance of group identity. As those of us who study and teach about groups well know, the identity-boundaries of groups set rules for group inclusion; at the same time, they carve out norms for exclusion. Embedded within these exclusionary norms, according to Ruscher, are various shared, normative, stereotypical understandings of the nature of outsiders. This simple truth is the cornerstone of Ruscher's approach to prejudiced communication.

In Chapter Two, "Language that Divides," Ruscher examines the wide variety of ways in which language allows for ingroup definition and outgroup exclusion. Language that divides, such as group epithets, attributions of personality traits or other characteristics, and biased grammars (e.g., pro-masculine gender bias in English), both serves as signposts pointing toward ingroup beliefs and functional idea-transmission units, which establish and maintain "us versus them" logics. These logics, in turn, both issue from and serve ingroup cohesion and outgroup differentiation. The strength of this chapter is in the supporting examples, each of which could serve to stimulate lively discussion in a seminar setting.

In Chapter Three, "Shared Stereotypes," Ruscher examines how stereotypical understandings are developed and shared in groups. Shared stereotypes, which are often employed as linguistic shortcuts for referring to outgroup

members, appear to be self-perpetuating in all kinds of groups, especially in the absence of extenuating information. Perhaps the most frightening aspect of this group dynamic is that stereotypes appear to be passed along and accepted uncritically, even unconsciously. Even those who take pride in themselves as unprejudiced can be observed "going along" with stereotypical attributions, as the pressures associated with group membership outweigh the need to take a stand, even on a morally compelling issue such as racism or sexism. The sections on grounding, consensus motivation, storytelling, group socialization and identification, and impression management will be of particular interest to group communication scholars. The chapter is rounded out by an examination of studies on group entry and promotion in the workplace and decision-making in juries. These later sections, which have application to everyday life, could serve as rich fodder for classroom discussion.

Chapter Four offers a summary of research on "talking down," examining at length patronizing ways of talking to outsiders, including "secondary baby talk," "foreigner talk," "controlling talk," and performance feedback. The most painful examples ate those related to how we typically communicate with the elderly and the disabled. The section on performance feedback in the workplace should give pause to anyone who studies organizational communication or is responsible for providing such feedback in the workplace.

Perhaps the subtlest, but most powerful, aspect of prejudiced communication is in the nonverbal surround. Chapter Five, "Preferred Cultural Patterns and Nonverbal Behavior," explores the dialectic between preferred or standard patterns of communication and the group pride that comes from maintaining particular group communication patterns. Nonverbal signals, such as inflection, dialect, word choice, prosody and rhythm, facial expressions, and touch, often read as indicators of communicative competence in specific cultural contexts, appear to carry a lot of weight in creating a sense of relative comfort/discomfort between ingroup and outgroup members.

The final two chapters, on "The News Media" and "The Culture of Prejudice," explore the power of popular culture to engage, transmit, and enforce preferred cultural patterns, including stereotypical views of marginal groups. From images to media access, from prejudiced humor to hate speech, Ruscher covers the research on prejudiced communication in mediated contexts with a deft hand.

Communication scholars seeking a text featuring critical, hermeneutic-qualitative, or post-colonialist insights would do better to look elsewhere. Ruscher,s own cognitive schemata, grounded in a view of communication as idea transmission, of group action as motivated by cognitive-psychological forces, and of research as scientific investigation, determined the purpose and shape of this volume. Overall, the book does a fine job of achieving the author’s stated goal, which is to "compile a body of knowledge regarding prejudiced communication, drawing upon psychology, communication studies, political science, sociology, lifespan studies, cross-cultural psychology, and discourse analysis" (p. 3). If you seek a well-organized, comprehensive review of existing social scientific, experimental, and discourse-analytic research related to prejudiced communication, you have found the right text. Further, the author’s interpretations of research findings and wide variety of examples, suitable for stimulating class discussion, are additional strengths of this work.

The evidence Ruscher presents for the pervasiveness of prejudiced communication is, in truth, disturbing. But perhaps, with this *knowledge, we* can develop the power to affect change. Though this is not one of Ruscher's stated goals, readers might well consider this book to be a wake-up call.